

**Middlesex County
Board of Chosen Freeholders**

Ronald G. Rios, *Freeholder Director*
Carol Bellante, *Freeholder Deputy Director*
Kenneth Armwood, *Liaison to the Office*
Charles Kenny
H. James Polos
Charles E. Tomaro
Blanquita B. Valenti

**Cultural & Heritage
Commissioners**

Ronald L. Becker, *Chair*
Michelle Chubenko, *Secretary*
Joan M. Conway
Lindsay Erben
Reginald Johnson
Janet Perrineau

www.middlesexcountynj.gov



**Middlesex County
Office of Culture and Heritage**

Oral History Guide



This Oral History Guide is offered by Middlesex County Office of Culture and Heritage

703 Jersey Avenue

New Brunswick, NJ 08901-3605

732.745.4489 (Voice), 732.745.3888 (TTY users only)

culturalandheritage@co.middlesex.nj.us

John A. Pulomena, *County Administrator*

Kathaleen R. Shaw, *Department Head, Business Development and Education*

Isha Vyas, *Division Head, Arts & History Programs/Author of Publication*

Kimberly Murray, *Graphic Artist/Design*

Funded in part by

Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders

New Jersey Historical Commission

Text culture to 56512 to explore art and history in Middlesex County

www.middlesexcountynj.gov

Table of Contents

<i>What is Oral History</i>	1
<i>Why is Oral History Important</i>	1
<i>Uses of Oral History Collections</i>	1
<i>Oral History in Education</i>	2
<i>Plan for the Interview</i>	2, 3
<i>Prepare for the Interview</i>	3
<i>Oral History Release Form</i>	4
<i>Family History and Suggested Questions</i>	5
<i>Biographical Information Form</i>	6
<i>Interview Checklist Form</i>	6
<i>Photograph Log</i>	7
<i>The Interview</i>	7, 8
<i>During the Interview</i>	8
<i>After the Interview</i>	9
<i>Bibliography and Other Resources</i>	9
<i>Glossary</i>	10

What is Oral History?

Oral history may be defined as people's recollections and thoughts regarding experiences that have personal, historical or cultural significance. Documentation of oral history, through interviews and transcription, is an important aspect of the historical record. In recent years, oral history has been recognized as an important research tool. Oral histories have been published as books and journals, placed in public and school libraries and into archives, and have been used in radio and video documentaries and museum exhibitions.

Oral history often focuses on the life and personal experiences of the person who is interviewed. An historian might be interested in the interviewee as a witness to history, whether it be the history of their occupation, family, community, events or the social context of political issues that affect the individual and the people and places they knew. Folklorists are interested in the interviewee as a member of a community and will explore their knowledge of local lore, legends and cultural expressions.

An oral history interview involves careful preparation as well as quick thinking. An interviewer should prepare topics in advance to guide the discussion. The interviewer should take notes and record the interview in audio or video format - all with the permission of the interviewee, of course. Recordings of the interview are usually transcribed into written form to be easily used by students, historians, teachers and researchers.



Why is Oral History Important?

Historical interpretations emerge from various segments of society. Those that appear in written texts generally represent only one voice- the author's. In order to gain the truest picture of history, one must "listen" to many voices. Oral history often contributes little known facts to the historical record. It places stories in cultural context, provides realism from eyewitness accounts and often frames a story with human and emotional experiences. Unique memories and life experiences can be preserved, when they otherwise might have been lost.

Uses of Oral History Collections

- Create museum exhibitions
- Document and interpret historic neighborhoods and other historic sites
- Support genealogy or family research
- Document community history, with a particular focus on the perspectives of historically underrepresented groups
- Preserve vanishing languages
- Enliven the study of history in elementary and secondary classrooms
- Contribute primary sources of information for scholarly articles, books, dissertations, etc.
- Narrate neighborhood tours
- Provide raw materials for poetry, songs and theatrical presentations of all kinds
- Provide materials for folklorists to preserve and study culture as it is expressed in everyday life
- Contribute to the study of cultures and lifeways of people by anthropologists and archaeologist

Oral History in Education

Oral histories are used in the classroom as an enrichment tool. At every grade level, the activity of gathering oral histories can provide students with a stimulating and fulfilling way of participating in history. They help students discover that history is all around them. It relates to them directly, as well as to their family members, friends and community. This lends a human aspect to topics which students may only have known through books. Student oral histories will help create and strengthen relationships between school and community. The teacher can use the framework to contextualize the interviewees' stories, giving students the tools to explore the deeper implications of the fact/fiction dichotomy.

In the field, students explore their surroundings. They will engage in active learning, documenting history that is personally relevant. History takes on a new significance for young people as they directly experience and interact with local history and raise their awareness about issues or moments in time.

Oral history projects strengthen listening, writing and public speaking skills. They help students develop critical thinking and organizational skill while providing the perfect setting for intergenerational exchanges to draw on the knowledge that is unique to the older citizens of their community.



Plan for the Interview

Projects and Topic Ideas

An oral history project affords enormous flexibility in the scope of topics, from biographies to documentation of local and national events, to recollections of people and places. The project can focus on a time period, a particular family or organization, or on the cultural or social characteristics of a town or region. It can deal with an influential figure in the area or the whole history of a particular family and how they were affected by events of history. These are historical approaches. A project could also have the collection of local folklore as its objective. It may also look at the ethnic make-up of a community and its interaction with the people who lived in the area. Once a topic is chosen and a goal established, individuals or groups of individuals must be identified and scheduled for interviews.

How to Identify Potential Interviewees

For family histories, choose members of one's immediate or extended family, family friends, or any local residents who were in contact with them. For topics specific to events or a time period, contact community groups, houses of worship, senior centers, nursing homes, union and civic organizations, libraries and veterans homes. Seek a balance of economic, racial and ethnic groups, men and women, and long-time and more recent residents of a community. All have a legitimate story to add to the historical record.

Researching Your Interviewee

The Preparation for a successful interview is an essential aspect of the entire project. Learn all you can about the interviewee you are researching from both primary and secondary sources. Among local sources are:

- Libraries – books on local history, periodicals and newspapers from the time and location under study.
- Genealogical Records – birth/marriage/death certificates, scrapbooks, family bibles and photographs.
- Newspaper Archives – many local papers have their own archives.
- Historical Societies – a rich source of information of every kind, including books, personal collections, pictures, diaries and business ledgers.

- Historic Sites and Museums – may have significance to the project because of their location, their function, and the artifacts they display. Also the staff may be very knowledgeable about the area and its people, and may have printed material available.
- County and Municipal/Cultural/Historical Agencies and Offices – they are set up to serve the public and have a wealth of information for you on the area's history and its inhabitants.
- Fraternal Groups – such as Rotary, Elks, religious institutions, labor unions. These are private groups that may have insight into a particular segment of the population, and usually keep records that may be of use.
- Internet – online research can be done to supplement your research from other sources.

Contact Your Interviewee

Once you have identified possible interviewees, call or visit them to request an interview. All these action items are contained in the Oral History Release Form. Make sure the interviewee understands:

- Oral history's purposes and procedures in general, projects aims and anticipated uses. His or her rights to the interviews including editing, access restrictions, copyrights.
- Inform them if you plan to contribute the information to an archive or library, or share it with the public as a media presentation, website, or any other format.
- Inform him/her that the recording will remain confidential until he/she gives permission via a signed release.

Equipment

Use the best digital recording equipment within your means to reproduce the interviewee's voice accurately and if appropriate, visual images. Before the interview, become familiar with the equipment and be knowledgeable about its function.

Repository

It is important to find a permanent home or repository for your project materials. Look to a library, historical society or museum that will have ongoing curatorial responsibility for care of all project materials, and one that will provide storage and access to media, interview information and transcripts.

Establish a Project Timeline

A project timeline represents milestones for completing the research, preparing interview outlines and completing interviews and transcripts.

Prepare for the Interview

Establish a record-keeping system to provide continuity and necessary support for interviewer, interviewee and the project manager. Develop standard forms at the outset to help keep the project on track. Some of the commonly used forms are:

Oral History Release Form

Interviewees hold the ownership to their interviews until and unless they transfer those rights to an individual or institution. This is done by signing a release form. The release form should be developed based on your project needs. Its purpose should be explained to the interviewee at the outset. Both the interviewer and the interviewee should sign the release form after each recording session or at the end of the interview.

- **Oral History Release Form** – provides for transfer of ownership to the project and/or repository.
- **Biographical Information Form** – contains the interviewee's basic biographical information.
- **Interview Checklist Form** – provides immediate access to all pertinent information about the interview and should be completed as soon as possible after the interview.
- **Photograph Log** – Records the title of subject of each image and identifies the source.
Similar logs can be created for artifacts and other materials donated by the interviewee.

Oral History Release Form

Subject of Interview _____
Interviewee/Speaker _____
Interviewer/Recorder _____
Location of Interview _____

I, _____ (Name of Interviewee/Speaker), hereby give this interview recorded on _____ (Date) to the _____ (Repository), as a donation. With this gift, I transfer to the _____ (Repository) legal title and all literary rights, including copyright.

I understand the interview may be made available for research and such public programming as the _____ (Repository) may determine. This may include use of the interview material in live or recorded programs for radio, television, cable or any electronic publishing that is not for profit.

My signature indicates that _____ (Name of Interviewer/Recorder) has my permission to make copies of the audio/video recording, photographs and transcripts of the interview noted above, according to the provisions and restrictions below: (Please circle Yes or No)

Yes	No	for bona fide research purposes
Yes	No	for educational use (in seminars, workshops, conferences or teaching)
Yes	No	for broadcasting purposes
Yes	No	for publications, including internet publication
Yes	No	for public performance, display or exhibition
Yes	No	for deposit in a research library or archive

With the following provisions/restrictions: (Please circle Yes or No)

Yes	No	I want my contribution to be anonymous
Yes	No	I want the names of others to be changed/rendered anonymous
Yes	No	I want the recording and transcript to be "closed" to other researchers for _____ years from the date of the recording

Signed Interviewee/Speaker _____
Print Name _____ Date _____
Address _____
Email _____ Phone _____
Signed Interviewer/Recorder _____ Date _____

Family History and Suggested Questions

*Use these topics and questions as a general guide for your interview.
Be flexible and sensitive to style and language.*

What do you know about your family surname? How did it originate? What does it mean? Has it undergone any changes? Are there any stories about those changes? What are the traditional first or middle names or nicknames in your family? How did they come about?

Where and when were you born? How long have you lived at your current home? Where did you live as a child? What can you recall about your family home and neighborhood? What was family life like when you were growing up?

Where did you go to school/high school/college? What was your field of study? Do you have any special memories from your school/college days?

What were your favorite childhood games? Have sports changed much during your lifetime? What other kinds of leisure or entertainment have you enjoyed?

Who was your best friend and what did you like to do together?

How did your parents (grandparents, and other relatives) come to meet and marry?

Do you know any stories about how your family first came to the United States? Where did they settle? How did they make a living?



How did you celebrate holidays and special occasions? What are some of the traditions still carried on by your family?

Does your family have special traditions regarding food? Are there stories connected to the preparation of special foods?

What did you do for a living? (Or what type of work did you do as a homemaker?) Has this type of work changed?

How have historical events affected your family? For example, what were some of your or your family's experiences during the Depression, World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, the 1960s, 9/11?

What changes have you noticed during your life in areas such as fashion, morality and technology? How do you feel about these changes?

What family heirlooms or keepsakes and mementos do you possess? Why are they valuable to you? What is their history? How were they handed down? Are there any memories or stories connected with them?

Do you have any photo albums, scrapbooks, home movies? Who made them? When? Can you describe/explain their contents? Who is pictured? What activities and events are documented?

What "words of advice" would you like to pass on to future generations in your family?

Biographical Information Form

(Please Print Clearly)

Project Name _____

Name of Interviewee (include maiden name) _____

Company/Organization (if any) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ Email _____

Place of Birth (city and country) _____ Birth Date _____

Sex _____ Race/Ethnicity _____

Spouse's Name _____ Children _____

Occupation (s) and years worked _____

Is there any other information that you can think of that might be helpful to this project?

Interview Checklist Form

(Please Print Clearly)

Project Name _____

Name of Interviewee _____

Name of Interviewer _____

Interviewer's Relationship to Interviewee (if appropriate) _____

Included with this Submission	Release Form	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	Recording format (audio/video)	<input type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Video
	Number of Recordings (CDs, tape, video)	<input type="checkbox"/> Master <input type="checkbox"/> Duplicate How Many _____
	Length of recording Digital (in minutes)	
	Transcription	<input type="checkbox"/> Complete Date _____
	Transcription reviewed by interviewee	Date _____
	Are photographs included? <i>(If yes, please complete our Photograph Log)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

Interview Outline _____

Additional Comments _____

Photograph Log

(Please Submit this Form with Every Photograph)

Project Name _____

Name of Interviewee _____

Name of Interviewer _____

PHOTOGRAPH # 1 (If series, how many ____)

Location _____ Date of Photograph _____

People in Photograph (left to right) _____

Other description _____

Photographer _____

Please copy this form as needed, writing the photograph numbers in the blanks provided.
Labels of the description of photos should be fixed on the back of the photo.

The Interview

Setting

Setting is very important; the interview should be conducted in a quiet room at the interviewee's home or office with minimal background noises or distractions such as a telephone, television or children. Restaurants and public places are not good locations.

Interview Kit

It is helpful to put together an interview kit that includes:

- Recorder
- Microphone, cables and microphone stand
- AC adapter/transformer and extension cord
- Batteries
- Notebook and pencils
- Folder containing the release form (two copies – one for the master file and one to leave with the interviewee), the interview information form, the biological information form and log of photographs
- Camera to take a picture of the interviewee (this is necessary for audio interviews and it is helpful to add to the master file for the video interviews)





Record an Opening Announcement

The interviewer should record a “lead-in” at the beginning of each session. The lead-in should consist of, at the very least, the names of interviewee and the interviewer, the date, interview’s location, project title and anyone else present in the room. Have the speaker state his or her name and location on tape for the record (spelling all words – including his or her name).

On Audio Interviews

- Use an external microphone
- Position the microphone nine inches from the interviewee
- Use a microphone stand
- Be sure the tape has started recording before you start speaking

On Video Interviews

- Mount the camera on a tripod
- Position the camera a few feet from your interviewee
- Focus on the interviewee’s face, upper body, and hands
- Avoid using the zoom feature

During the Interview

- Remember to keep the interview setting as comfortable as possible to help the interviewee concentrate.
- It’s important to establish a rapport with the interviewee. A sense of trust will help make a good interview.
- Bring your list of topics or questions to ask, but do not be tied to it. Use it as a general guideline.
- Ask probing questions when sensing that the interviewee is hesitant to continue on a topic you feel is of value and ask follow-up questions when necessary: For example, “Can you tell me more about that/how did you feel when that happened?”
- Maintain eye contact with the speaker, listen carefully and respond by smiling and nodding, avoid saying “yes” or “uh-huh.”
- Slow down speakers who talk too fast but do not hurry or interrupt them.
- Keep interviews on track, redirect the subject when necessary. Try to have the interviewee talk in specifics, rather than in generalities.
- Keep your opinions out of the interview, and don’t ask leading questions that suggest answers.
- Do not be afraid of occasional silences. Memories may bring up difficult emotions.
- Be sensitive and have patience.
- It may be helpful to ask the interviewee to show you photographs, newspaper clippings or letters. Such documents encourage memories and deepen the conversation.

Stay Alert

- Make sure the recorder is running, check several times during the interview session.
- Do not go more than two hours; arrange to come back for a second session. Often the second and third meetings bring out the best parts of the interview.

After the Interview

Processing the Interview Recording

- Use acid-free markers to clearly label the interview media with the name of interviewee, interviewer, project, date and media number if more than one is used.
- Next, and very important, regardless of the type of recording media, make backup copies of your interview to protect them from inadvertent loss.
- Store and process the recordings according to established archival standards designed for the media format used. Determine how access will be provided.
- Review your recording and make a quick outline of the topics covered, key stories and discussions.

Transcribing

The goal of an oral history project is to provide access to the recordings and create transcripts. Transcripts ensure that your interviews will be preserved and provide reference tools for continuing access to interview information.

- Transcribing is difficult and time-consuming. Develop a transcription guide to maintain consistency in transcribing formats.
- For every one hour of recording, it usually takes up to six hours of transcription.
- Preserve the specific qualities of the interviewee's conversation and speech patterns but reduce the frequency of the oral tics such as "um."

Review the Transcript

- Interviewer should carefully review the completed transcripts, checking for accuracy and missing words.
- Interviewees should review the transcripts for accuracy, and to be sure they are comfortable.

Reminder: Oral historians should strive for intellectual honesty. Take care that you do not misrepresent or manipulate the words of the person being interviewed. And, if the project deals with community history, the interviewer should be sensitive to the community, taking care to avoid stereotypes.

Bibliography and Other Resources

Baylor University Institute for Oral History

Dunaway, David K. and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publishers, 1996

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: SUNY Press. 1990

Grele, Ronald. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. New York: Praeger, 1991.

H-Oralhist, <http://www.oralhistory.org/h-oralhist-listserv/>

Ives, Edward D. *The Tape Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974.

Mercier, Laurie and Madeline Buckendorf. *Using Oral History in Community History Projects*. Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1992.

Oral History Association, <http://www.oralhistory.org>

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Schorzman, Terri A. *A Practical Introduction to Video History: The Smithsonian Institution and Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Experiment*. Melbourne, Fla.: Krieger Publishing Co., 1993

Sommer, Barbara W., and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual* (2009).

Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Whitman, Glenn. *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards through Oral History*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press 2004. <http://www.tellmeyourstories.org/>

Glossary

Anecdote – A short narrative about an interesting, amusing, or curious incident, often biographical and based on a real event.

Archive – A place where documents, letters, diaries, photos, recordings, and other information are stored and can be used by researchers with special permission.

Community – Any group of people sharing a common identity based on family, occupation, region, religion, culture, gender, age, interest, or avocation; where you live, go to school, work, worship, or have family. People may be part of many overlapping communities, including their neighborhood, church, school, clubs, service organization, or peer groups.

Copyright – The exclusive legal right to print or otherwise reproduce, publish, or sell copies of original materials, such as oral history interviews, and to license their production and sale by others.

Culture – A people's ways of being, knowing, and doing.

Curate – To manage the long-term care of historical documents for maximum access.

Folklorist – Someone who studies how people's expressive traditions - their stories, customs, art, skills, beliefs, music, and other expressions - are created, shaped, and made meaningful in community life. Folklorists conduct much of their research by observing and interviewing people "in the field."

Heritage – Something of value or importance passed down by or acquired from a predecessor; recognized cultural identity.

Indigenous - Originating and developing naturally in a particular land, region, or environment.

Legend – A narrative supposedly based on fact, and told as true, about a person, place, or incident.

Oral History – A process of collecting, usually by means of a recorded interview, recollections and personal experience narratives of individuals for the purpose of expanding the historical record of a place, event, person or cultural group.

Personal Experience Narrative – First-person narratives usually composed orally by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives.

Preservation Master – Interview recording kept intact to preserve the interview and keep in permanent and appropriate storage with the master files; user copies are made for access and processing.

Docent – A person who conducts guided tours through a museum and discusses and comments on the exhibits.

Ethnography – The process of documenting a group's cultural traditions.

Family Folklore – The stories, traditions, customs, rituals, expressions, celebrations, foodways, games, and photographs that are preserved and passed on within a family.

Fieldwork – Documentation of cultural expressions and ways of life conducted in the social and cultural contexts in which they take place; the gathering of anthropological or sociological data through first-hand observation and interviews in the field.

Folklore/Folklife – The traditional expressive culture shared within various groups: familial, occupational, religious and regional. Expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms, such as custom, belief, occupational skill, foodways, language, drama, ritual, music, narrative, play, craft, dance, drama, art, and architecture. Generally these expressions are learned orally, by imitation, or in performance.

Primary Source – First-hand information with no interpretation between the document and the researcher. Examples are oral history recordings and transcripts, diaries, letters, family bibles, or government records.

Repository – A facility where oral history materials are deposited and permanently kept.

Secondary Source – A publication or other document created using various types of historical information including primary sources.

Tradition – Knowledge, beliefs, customs, and practices that have been handed down from person to person by word of mouth or by example. For instance, the practice of always having a certain meal for a holiday.

Tradition-Bearer – A person who has knowledge, skills, and experience to share, for example someone who learned to quilt or cook from a family member or someone who has been farming for many years.

Transcribe – Taking down the contents of an audio or video recording, word for word into written form.

Sources – http://www.folklife.si.education_exhibits/resources/guide/introduction.aspx; Sommer, Barbara W., and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual* (2009).